

## **Distribution of painting themes in the Natal Drakensberg\***

by

**Aron D. Mazel**

(Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa)

### **SYNOPSIS**

In this paper the north/south distribution of painting themes in the Natal Drakensberg is discussed. The themes treated are bees and ladders, domestic animals and historical scenes and ritual paintings. Possible explanations for most of these distributions are given.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In general terms one must agree with Lewis-Williams (1977) that the south-east painting group identified by Van Riet Lowe (1956), of which the Natal Drakensberg is part, comprises a single cultural unit. Recent research, however, has shown that there are notable geographical distributions of painting themes in the Natal Drakensberg. In March 1981 I completed a 3-year rock-art recording project in the area (Mazel 1981). Although the project was geared primarily towards conservation it covered almost the whole Natal Drakensberg, from Royal Natal National Park in the north to Bushman's Nek in the south, and over 400 sites and 20 000 paintings were recorded (Mazel, 1981). This was not the first detailed rock-art recording programme conducted in the Natal Drakensberg, but previous research had concentrated on specific geographical areas, for example, Pager (1971) in the Cathedral Peak area, Vinnicombe (1976) in the southern Natal Drakensberg and Lewis-Williams (1977) in the Giant's Castle Game Reserve. Thus, this is the first study which has enabled an overall perspective of the paintings to be obtained by a single recorder, thereby allowing for a series of north/south orientated contrasts to be identified. The purpose of this paper is to outline these contrasts and where possible suggest explanations for them.

An arbitrary boundary to divide the northern and southern research area was decided upon after close examination of the data revealed that the north/south contrasts to be discussed would be best indicated using this boundary. This boundary, which is at latitude 29°15'S, runs through the southern Giant's Castle Game Reserve. Therefore, Royal Natal National Park, Cathedral Peak and Monk's Cowl State Forests and northern Giant's Castle Game Reserve will constitute the north and the south will include Giant's Castle Game Reserve, Highmoor, Mkomazi, Cobham and Garden Castle State Forests and Kamberg, Loteni and Vergelegen Nature Reserves.

\* The research for this paper was done while conducting an archaeological survey of the Natal Drakensberg commissioned and funded by the Directorate of Forestry.

## THE CASE STUDIES

*Bees and ladders*

All definite paintings of bees, bees' nests, honeycombs and ladders (which were presumably employed to procure honey from the nests) have been recorded from the northern Natal Drakensberg—for a complete description of them see Pager (1971). Fig. 1, however, shows bees' nests with associated bees and Fig. 2 illustrates examples of ladders. A total of 42 scenes with bees and associated features were recorded during the project and a further 55 by Pager (1971) in sites



Fig. 1. Paintings of bees' nests, with bees in the lower one, from Brotherton Shelter (scale in centimetres).

not recorded by me in the Cathedral Peak area. Only one possible ladder has been recorded from the south (at Christmas Shelter), but it is of note that this site is close to the defined north/south boundary. Vinnicombe (1976: 272), who recorded rock art in the southern Natal Drakensberg and adjacent areas, also concluded that 'no actual scenes of bees or honey-collecting have been found within the survey areas'. Fig. 3 illustrates the above-described distribution pattern.



Fig. 2. Paintings of ladders from Ladder Cave (scale in centimetres).

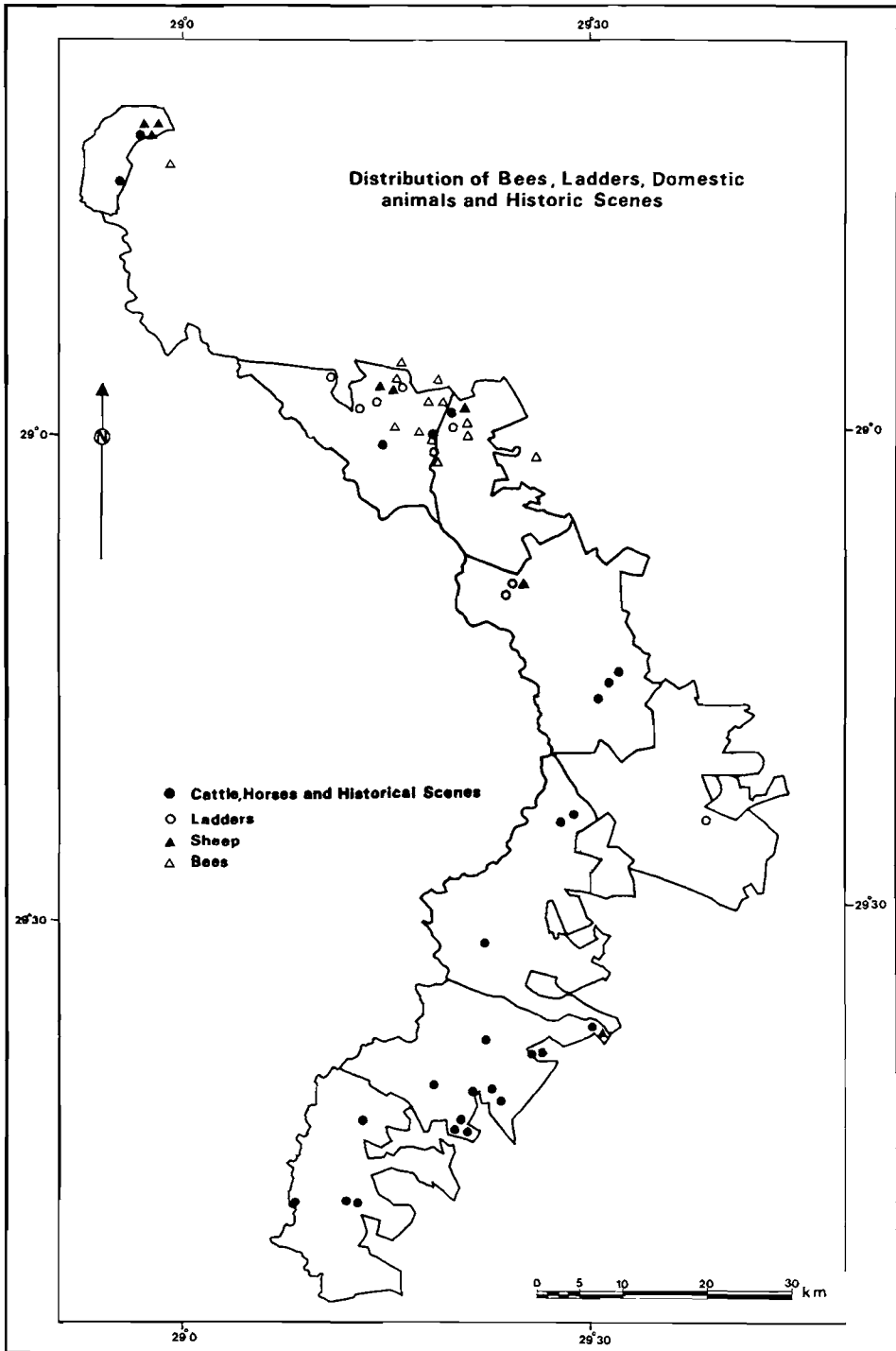


Fig. 3. Distribution of paintings of bees, ladders, domestic animals and historical paintings in the Natal Drakensberg.

Evidence at hand suggests that this north/south distribution pattern may extend into the Natal Midlands. Four sites are known from the northern Natal midlands which contain paintings of bees and associated subjects and, as mentioned above, none were recorded by Vinnicombe (1976) in the southern areas she investigated away from the Drakensberg. One of these sites in the midlands, illustrated by Clark (1959), but incorrectly labelled Ladysmith in the Cape instead of Natal, has since been flooded by the Spioenkop Dam. This site had a painting of a ladder with a man on the top. Tugela Shelter, on the other hand, which contains both a ladder and bees' nests with associated bees (Fig. 4) was discovered during an archaeological survey of the area to be flooded by the Woodstock Dam. Plans are under way to save these paintings.



Fig. 4. Painting of a ladder and juxtaposed bees' nests with bees in them (redrawn by P. Brown).

Having established the distribution pattern, our attention turns to possible explanations for it. The first person to recognise the richness of the Cathedral Peak area in terms of these scenes was Pager (1971). He also mentioned that this richness was unique in southern Africa. At that stage he gave no explanation for them. Several years later, and drawing inspiration from Trezise's (1972) work on the Australian Aborigines, Pager (1974) offered a 'magico-religious' explanation for the paintings of bees and related subjects. In his study of superimpositioning and juxtapositioning in the Cathedral Peak area he found that bees and related subjects were highly ranked (ie. frequently formed the overlying element in superimpositioning), in fact third after eland and 'mythical creatures'. He listed and illustrated scenes from the north where bees and related subjects were associated with religious figures and concluded (p. 8) that 'the involvement of the bees with the mythical creatures is indisputable'. Citing Trezise's (1972) research on the Australian Aborigines, which argues that the rock painters purposely superimposed paintings in the belief that the new paintings would derive magical potency from underlying paintings, Pager (1974) suggests that this principle may account for the many superimpositions found in southern African rock art, particularly those underlying bees and related subjects.

While not wanting to enter into a debate on the motivation behind rock paintings, I feel that a more plausible explanation for the depictions of bees and related subjects lies partly with the hypotheses postulated by Lewis-Williams (1981). He holds the view that bees and honey enjoyed a rich symbolic position among the Southern San and he suggests that it is extremely likely that the artist would have thought them to have /ko: öde (supernatural potency) like other powerful things. According to Lewis-Williams the importance of bees lies with their association with dance, and he quotes Stow (1905) and Bleek & Lloyd (1911) to support this notion. More supportive evidence for this comes from the modern !Kung, who today 'still consider bees to be very potent, and they believe that a dance performed at a time when the bees are swarming is especially powerful and effective (Wilmsen pers. comm.)' (Lewis-Williams 1981: 8). Discussing a painting scene Lewis-Williams (1981: 8) concludes that 'I do not suggest that the men painted at Cullen's Wood are literally dancing in a swarm of bees any more than the !Kung do, but that the bees are juxtaposed as a symbol of potency. The presence of the bees is, like everything else in the group, consonant with trance performance and potency.' Herein, I tentatively argue, lies part of the reason for the distribution of bees and related subjects in the Natal Drakensberg.

It is suggested that the presence of these features in the rock art in the north may reflect the past distribution of bees in the Natal Drakensberg. This distribution might have influenced two factors which lead the San to paint bees and related subjects only in the north. These are the 'use' of bees in trance performance and the exploitation of honey, known from historical sources (see Pager 1974) to be an extremely valued commodity.

On a general scale Guy (1970: 3) maintains that the Drakensberg is not conducive to good honey production and that 'no contemporary bee keeper would give it a second glance'. More specifically, discussing the Cathedral Peak area, Guy (1970: 3) mentions that 'at the present time, honeybees are far from

abundant in the area, despite a few gum trees to boost the wild flora. These are small and isolated pockets of natural forest, and *Leucosidia sericea* and *Budleya salviifolia*—both bee plants—are common'. Thus, to some degree, a bee population would be dependent on the occurrence of natural forest. Pager (1971) has extrapolated from the Pearse maps of the Cathedral Peak and Cathkin Park areas that there is only 4 per cent forest and bush cover. From my own observation this figure would be significantly less in the southern Drakensberg, and, therefore, possibly too low to support bee communities. Another factor which may have influenced the distribution of bee populations is the suggestion by many people who work in, and others associated with the area, that the climate in the south is more extreme than in the north, with temperatures dropping below zero more frequently and snowfalls a more regular occurrence. Those adverse conditions are likely to be unfavourable to bees particularly if, as argued above, there would have been a limited food supply for them (Clark 1951). Unfortunately, at this point, this hypothesis must remain tentative because as Tyson *et al.* (1976: 34) have reported—'owing to the paucity of temperature recording stations in the region, it is difficult to show the Drakensberg as other than a fairly uniform temperature region'.

At present these explanations must remain tenuous. They require substantiation by a search for documentation of bee communities in the general area, an intensive vegetation survey and more extensive research into the possible climatic variations in the area. Nevertheless, they do hint at possible interpretations and suggest avenues of further corroborative research.

#### *Domestic animals and Historical scenes*

Paintings of domestic animals and historical subjects with guns, horses, wagons and other items which would have been introduced by the whites have been recorded from both the north and south. In the north the emphasis, excluding dogs, is on sheep (Fig. 7) with few cattle depicted and there is only one recorded historical scene. This shows human beings with guns and associated separate guns. In the south, on the other hand, not only is there a change to an emphasis on horses and cattle, but historical scenes are abundant (Fig. 5). The northernmost paintings of horses are in the southern Giant's Castle Game Reserve. Fig. 6 gives some idea of the different proportions of domestic animals depicted in the two areas. Fig. 3 shows the distribution of paintings of domestic animals and historical scenes.

It is argued here that the pattern outlined is linked to the penetration of Iron Age peoples up the Tugela Basin, close to the foothills of the northern Drakensberg. An Early Iron Age site dated to the seventh century A.D. has been described from the central Tugela Valley (Maggs 1980a). This site is, as the crow flies, roughly one hundred kilometres from the Drakensberg. Fig. 8 shows that both Early Iron Age and Late Iron Age settlement would have been closer to the northern than the southern Drakensberg. This encroachment of Iron Age people in to what was previously exclusive San territory may have disrupted San settlement patterns, causing them ultimately to abandon this domain. Therefore the San may have stopped living in the north long before the arrival of the whites.



Fig. 5. Painting of an historical scene depicting mounted horsemen with hats and guns, cattle and a waggon from Bamboo Mountain Shelter 5 (after P. Vinnicombe 1976). The scene is 89 cm long.

In the south, on the other hand, the Iron Age peoples probably never posed any threat to San lifestyles, which may have persisted undisturbed until the arrival of the whites. Large-scale white migration into Natal took place in the late 1830s. It is against this scenario that the distribution of paintings of domestic animals and historical scenes becomes understandable.

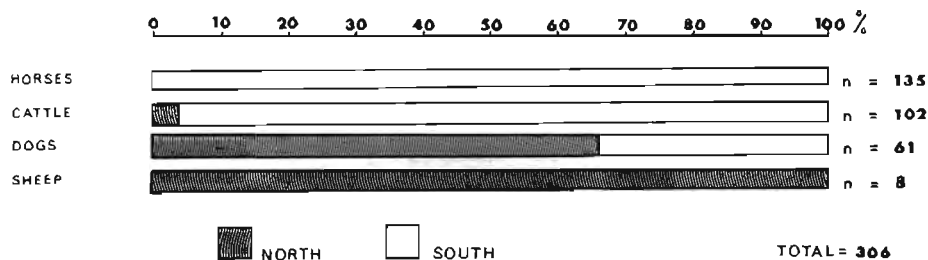


Fig. 6. Frequency of paintings of domestic animals in the Natal Drakensberg showing north/south distribution.

The Early Iron Age peoples who lived in the central Tugela Valley in the seventh century A.D. had both sheep and cattle (Maggs 1980a). There is evidence that the San in the north came into contact with them (Maggs 1980a, Maggs & Ward 1980). This most probably led to them and aspects of their economy being painted by the San. Horses were introduced by the whites in the 1830s. By this time, however, the San may no longer have been living in the north, although this area may still have been used as a springboard for raids. In the light of this information, the almost total absence of historical paintings in the north becomes explicable. In the south, however, the San continued occupying the Drakensberg





Fig. 7. Painting of a fat-tailed sheep from Battle Cave (scale in centimetres).

until their conflict with the whites demanded otherwise, Expeditions against the San would have been an integral part of their settled lifestyles and, no doubt, would have influenced them to paint domestic animals and historical scenes. Vinnicombe (1976) has made reference to painted scenes which may illustrate actual historical events. The emphasis on the horse is also understandable, because—'it was undoubtedly the horse that had the greatest economic and social impact. In addition to revolutionising their hunting techniques, the horse provided both food and transport' (Vinnicombe 1976: 157). Sheep, on the other hand 'do not appear to have played nearly as significant a part in the lives of the historic Bushmen as horses and cattle, although archival evidence shows that they were stolen and eaten on occasion' (Vinnicombe 1976: 157). This statement is supported by the paucity of depictions of sheep in the south.

### *Ritual paintings*

This section is divided into two; a discussion of the occurrence of certain themes in the areas, and a discussion of the varying distribution of sites containing ritual paintings, between the north and south.

Before proceeding some definitions are required. The term 'ritual' is used to indicate all figures which combine human and animal elements. These figures are interpreted as representing symbols of religious thought (Lewis-Williams 1977). More specific terms under this umbrella heading are 'trance-buck', 'split-figures' and 'therianthropes'. Trance-buck exhibit both human and animal features and generally have limbs/wings which are outstretched behind their backs and their legs are tucked in under their torsos which are generally in forward postures. Following Lewis-Williams (1977) the term 'trance-buck' is used in preference to others which have been used to describe these paintings, for example, 'winged antelope', 'flying buck' and 'alites'. Split-figures are essentially human figures with vertical white lines, sometimes obliterated, down the centre of their torsos, thereby creating the split-torso impression (Vinnicombe 1976). Often these figures are therianthropes. The term 'therianthrope' refers to all other paintings which display human and animal characteristics: thus trance-buck are also therianthropes. The final term which requires defining is 'rain-making scene'. This

refers to any scene which contains human figures, sometimes dancing, with associated animals which have been interpreted as rain animals. Often these rain animals appear to be led by human beings (see Vinnicombe 1976). Figs 9, 10 and 11 show examples of trance-buck, split-figures and a rain-making scene.

Fig. 12 shows the distribution of sites with ritual paintings in the Natal Drakensberg. The different themes are identified. The most obvious anomalies regarding the occurrence of themes are that split-figures and rain-making scenes are present only in the south and that paintings of trance-buck are noticeably more common in the north.

Split-figures have been interpreted by Vinnicombe (1976) as being game-sorcerers. Lewis-Williams (1977: 241) refutes this argument and proposes that: 'the distinctive feature has been created by the painter's attempt to depict the white belly of the eland on human figures viewed from the front.' Neither of these interpretations, however, sheds any light on the possible reasons for their distribution. A possible explanation is that this distribution may be purely stylistic and the work of several artists over a short period of time. While this interpretation is plausible, there is unfortunately no data available at present to support it. Thus, it remains an interesting hypothesis worthy of further investigation.

None of the suggested interpretations of rain-dance scenes even hints at an explanation for their distribution. Carter (1970) has suggested that the San would have occupied the southern Drakensberg during summer. Lewis-Williams (1977), taking the argument further, has suggested that painting would have virtually been restricted to the summer months. Mazel (1981), using paintings as seasonal indicators, has also suggested that the paintings were executed during the wet, summer months. Carter's settlement model was for southern Natal but there is no reason why the same would not apply in the north. Thus, seasonality of painting is not regarded as a possible explanation for this enigma.

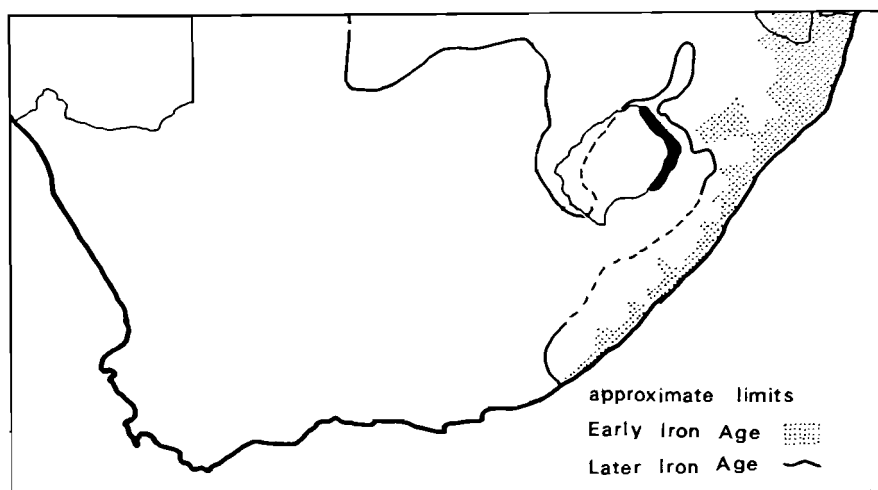


Fig. 8. Distribution of Iron Age peoples in South Africa (after Maggs 1980b). The Natal Drakensberg is shown as a black area.

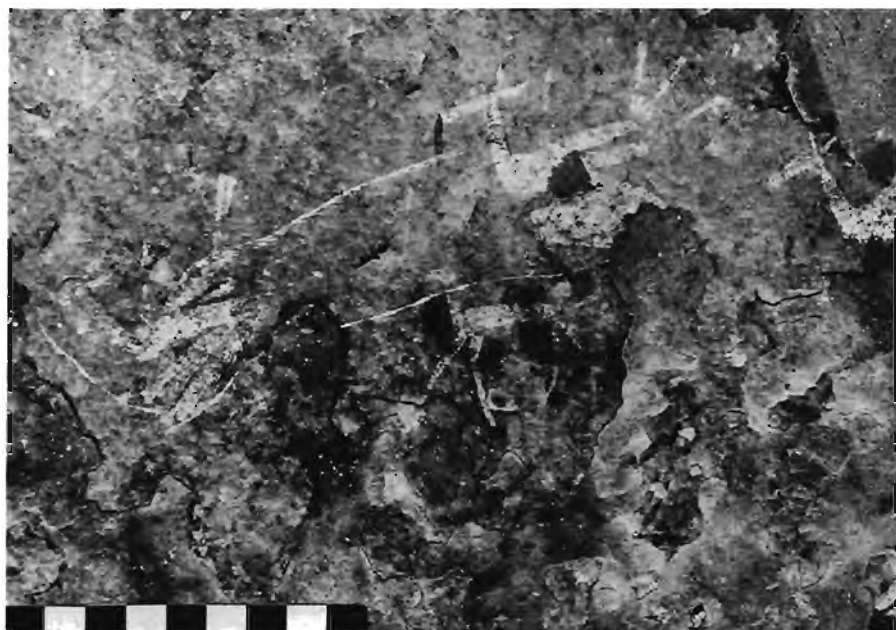


Fig. 9. Paintings of trance-buck from Clarke's Shelter (scale in centimetres).



Fig. 10. Paintings of split-figures from Bundoran 1 (scale in centimetres).

Another factor mentioned by both Wright (1971) and Vinnicombe (1976) which requires discussion in this regard was the San's reputation as successful rain-makers. This 'was indeed widespread and the services of Bushman (San) weather specialists much sought after, not only by the band or tribe of which they were members but also by their Bantu-neighbours' (Vinnicombe 1976: 334). In the previous section it was argued that the San in the north would have come into contact with the Bantu-speakers before those in the south. Therefore it is unlikely that their contact with the Bantu-speakers would have solely influenced this pattern. It is possible that the nature of their relationship may have changed in time, and that the San performed rain-making ceremonies for the Bantu-speakers after they had vacated the north. A simple argument against this being the reason for the pattern is that the San would surely have performed these ceremonies well before the arrival of the Bantu-speakers in Natal. Thus returning to my original statement, despite these potential interpretations we are no closer to understanding this pattern.

Trance-buck, mentioned earlier as being noticeably more common in the north, have been interpreted in a variety of ways (Lee & Woodhouse 1970, Pager 1971 1975, Vinnicombe 1976). The most recent, and in my opinion the most plausible, explanation has been presented by Lewis-Williams (1977: 233-234)—'it is the climactic moment when the medicine man achieves the contact with supernatural power for which he has been striving. When a man achieves this state and enters deep trance, he sometimes falls to his knees in the position frequently associated with the arms back posture.' Neither this interpretation nor any of the others proposed is of assistance in trying to understand the distribution of paintings of trance-buck.

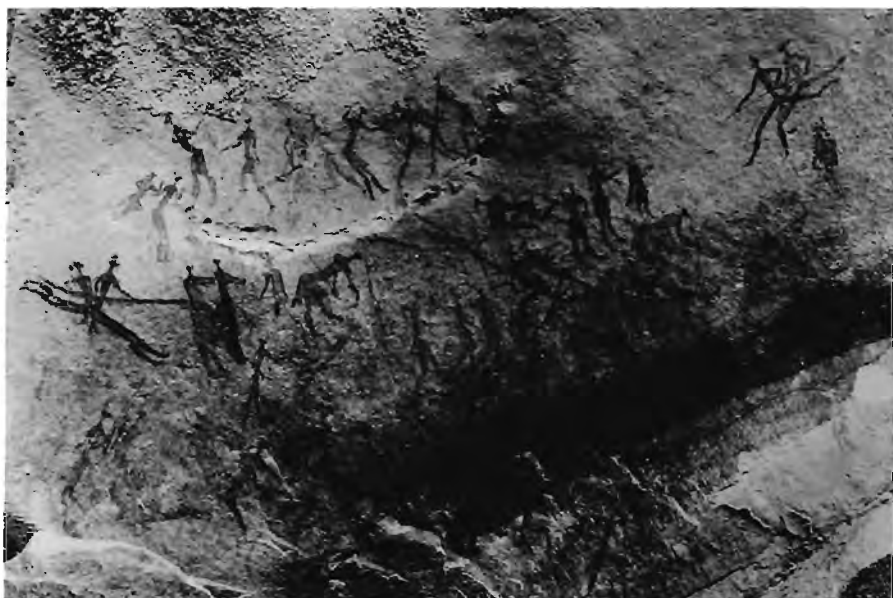


Fig. 11. Painting of a rain-dance scene from Gxalengenwa Shelter 1. This scene is 1,28 m long.

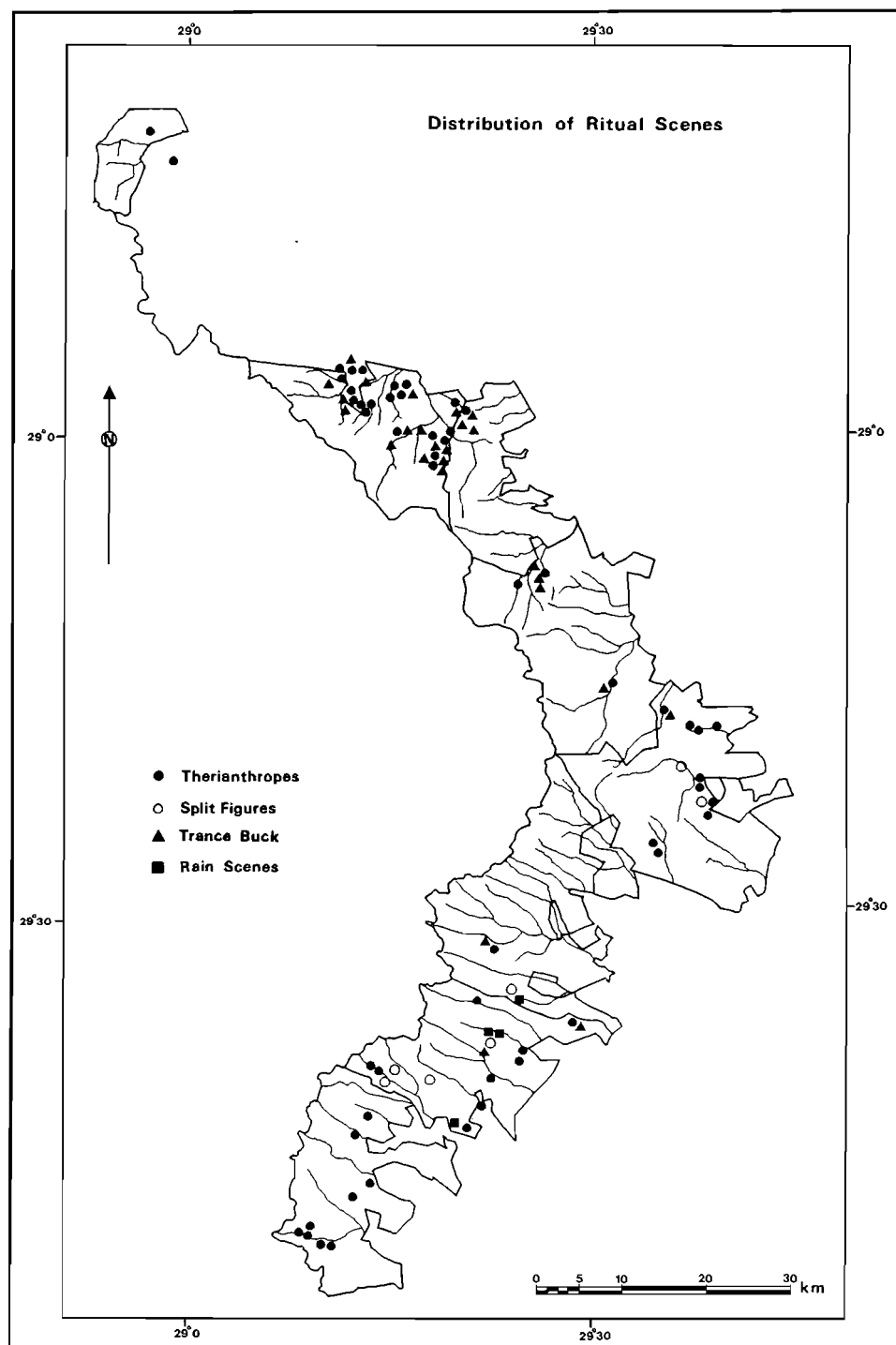


Fig. 12. Distribution of paintings of ritual paintings in the Natal Drakensberg.

Close examination of Fig. 12 shows that there is an almost equal number of sites in the north and south which contain paintings of ritual figures. The difference between the two, however, is that in the north these sites are generally tightly clustered while they are dispersed in the south. It is suggested here that these distributions reflect the contrasting valley patterns in these areas, which, in turn, influenced the different manner in which these areas were settled. The valley pattern in the north, especially in the Cathedral Peak area where the greatest concentration of ritual paintings occur, is essentially that of a large central river with large tributaries flowing into it at almost right angles. There would be easy movement up and down these valleys along the watercourses. The junctions of these rivers would certainly have served as gathering places for the bands operating in different valleys. It has already been suggested that associated with these band gatherings there would have been an upsurge of ritual activities and paintings thereof.

In the south, on the other hand, the valleys generally run parallel to each other and are more deeply cut than those in the north. The ridges between valleys would essentially act as barriers to movement. These physiographical features would have influenced a greater dispersal of the bands. It is hypothesised that there would have been relatively few central meeting places, and less contact between bands when compared to the Cathedral Peak area. These hypothetical differences in the settlement patterns between the north and south may have been responsible for the distribution of sites containing paintings of ritual figures.

#### DISCUSSION

The interpretations proposed to explain the north/south contrasts indicate that there are several factors which may have influenced the distribution of painting themes. These are: historical, ecological, physiographical, and concerning some of the ritual paintings, stylistic and cultural.

One of the original interpretations of paintings, still used by some today, is that they represent images of actual events. While this is not considered a satisfactory explanation for rock art per se there is evidence that this interpretation might be applicable to some of the paintings. In the themes presented above, it is possible that the depiction of historical scenes and domestic animals may be explained in this way. Vinnicombe (1976) has related paintings of historical scenes in the south to recorded historical events. However, long before large-scale white settlement in the Natal hinterland in the late 1830s the San contact with the incoming Iron Age populations would have forced them to alter their settled lifestyles. It has been argued that this contact may have led the San to abandon the northern Natal Drakensberg. Both these movements of people, first the blacks and then the whites, would have made a significant impact on the San, and were obviously large enough to influence the painting of them and aspects of their economy.

Paintings of ladders and honey-gathering scenes may be explained employing the same general iconographic concept, even though the influencing variables are quite different. In this context it has been proposed that ecological differences between the north and south would have affected bee distribution and thus the depiction of honey-gathering scenes. While this essentially simplistic explanation

may be applied to honey-procuring scenes, the scenes showing bees' nests and bees, particularly in association with ritual figures (Pager, 1971, 1974) can be explained in a different manner, even though the underlying factor of bee distribution remains the same. Here it has been argued, after Lewis-Williams (1981), that the additional potency that the trance performers derived from the swarming of bees was of sufficient significance to influence the painting of their nests. Thus the distribution of bees has generated two different sets of paintings, under the same general theme of bees and ladders, but which can be explained in different ways.

Discussion of style in rock paintings is as old as the rock art debate itself. These discussions have, however, generally tended to examine style in a temporal framework with limited discussion of style in a spatial framework and then on a very general and superficial level. Although the notion of style was only tentatively proposed to explain the distribution of split-figures, it is an extremely plausible explanation and is a dimension which students of rock art should begin concentrating on, especially if detailed studies in other areas produce painting distributions which may best be interpreted using a stylistic approach. Analytical tools to understand these aspects have not yet been developed but, no doubt, will evolve once researchers devote more attention to rock art styles in a spatial framework.

The last factor to be discussed is the one of physiography. There is no doubt that the north/south pattern outlined in this regard exists and is most probably explicable in terms of the contrasting valley patterns. An interesting study would be to determine whether this pattern is specific to sites with ritual paintings or whether it mirrors the generalised site distribution pattern in the area. This will be particularly interesting in the north in the light of Carter's (1970) and Lewis-Williams (1977, 1979) statements that ritual activities would most probably have been restricted to the wet, summer season when bands formed larger aggregations. It was suggested earlier in this paper that band grouping would most probably have taken place at river confluences. Thus, comparing these two patterns will either show that they are similar and that the majority of all sites are concentrated close to river confluences, or that the sites with no ritual paintings are more dispersed than the sites with ritual paintings. Either way it will tell us something new about site distribution in the Natal Drakensberg. I am at present investigating the general site distribution patterns in the area.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that despite the wealth of previous detailed studies in the Natal Drakensberg there are still gaps in our knowledge of its rock art. Some of these have been filled by my recently completed study, but at the same time numerous avenues of future research have been explored. One very important lesson to be learnt from this study is that it is imperative for detailed studies to be conducted over large areas to gain a full appreciation of the art content. These may, as in my study, serve to identify distributions of painting themes or show a homogeneity in the paintings of an area. Either way they will be of significance.

Although the patterns described in this paper was specific to the Natal Drakensberg, the mere fact that they exist is of significance to researchers further afield. This hopefully will stimulate similarly orientated research. Furthermore, knowledge of the factors which have influenced the patterns observed in the Natal Drakensberg should furnish them with additional tools for understanding the distribution of painting themes which may occur in their research areas.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many of the ideas expressed in this paper were commented on by Martin Hall, Tim Maggs, John Parkinson and Ann Macdonald. I am grateful to them for their useful comments which have improved the paper. My thanks are also due to Pat Vinnicombe for allowing me to use one of her tracings.

#### REFERENCES

- BLEEK, W. H. I. & LLOYD, L. 1911. *Specimens of Bushman folklore*. London: Allen.
- CARTER, P. L. 1970. Late Stone age exploitation patterns in southern Natal. *S. Afr. archaeol. Bull.* **25** (98): 55-58.
- CLARK, J. D. 1959. *The prehistory of Southern Africa* Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- CLARK, K. K. 1951. *Bee-keeping*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- GUY, R. D. 1970. Man and bee in southern Africa. *S. Afr. Bee J.* **42** (4): 2-6.
- LEE, D. N. & WOODHOUSE, H. C. 1970. *Art on the rocks of Southern Africa*. Cape Town: Purnell.
- LEWIS-WILLIAMS, J. D. 1977. Believing and Seeing. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: University of Natal.
- 1979. Report on rock art research. Paper read at the 1979 conference of the *S. Afr. Ass. Archaeol.* Cape Town.
- 1981. The thin red line: southern San notions and rock paintings of supernatural potency. *S. Afr. archaeol. Bull.* **36**: 5-13.
- MAGGS, T. 1980a. Msuluzi Confluence: a seventh century Early Iron Age site on the Tugela River. *Ann. Natal Mus.* **24** (1): 111-145.
- 1980b. The Iron Age sequence south of the Vaal and Pongola Rivers: some historical implications. *J. Afr. Hist.* **21**: 1-15.
- MAGGS, T & WARD, V. 1980. Driel Shelter: rescue at a Late Stone Age site on the Tugela River. *Ann. Natal Mus.* **24** (1): 35-70.
- MAZEL, A. D. 1981. Up and down the Little Berg: archaeological resource management in the Natal Drakensberg. Final Project Report to the Department of Water Affairs, Forestry and Environmental Conservation. Sub-project code: 23/1/2-1/3/10/03/02.
- PAGER, H. 1971. *Ndedema: a documentation of the rock paintings of the Ndedema Gorge*. Graz: Akademisch Druck.
- 1974. The magico-religious importance of bees and honey for the rock painters and Bushmen of southern Africa. *S. Afr. Bee J.* **46** (6): 6-9.
- 1975. *Stone age myth and magic*. Graz: Akademisch Druck.
- STOW, G. W. 1905. *The native races of South Africa*. London: Swan: Sonnenschein.
- TYSON, P. D. & PRESTON-WHYTE, R. A. & SCHULZE, R. E. 1976. The Climate of the Drakensberg. Natal Town and Regional Planning Reports. **31**. Pietermaritzburg.
- VAN RIET LOWE, C. 1956. *The distribution of prehistoric rock engravings and paintings in South Africa*. Archaeol. Ser. 7, Union of S.A. Dept. of Educ. Art and Sci.
- VINNICOMBE, P. 1976. *People of the Eland*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- WRIGHT, J. B. 1971. *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840-1870*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

Date received: 20 November 1981.